

Second generation swamis of Ramakrishna

Mission

N K Srinivasan

Sri Ramakrishna Mission is more than a hundred years old. It was started by Swami Vivekananda ,along with his 'gurubhais' or brother-disciples, in 1897.. The first generation of monks of this Order were the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa. Swami Brahmananda was the first president.[The headquarters is the Belur Math at Belur,near Kolkatha, India.]

The second generation of swamis were initiated by Holy Mother Sarada Devi and later by either Swami Brahmananda or Swami Saradananda or Swami Sivananda. This generation of swamis were very young ,most of them in their teens or early twenties. Fired by the spirit of renunciation and inspired by Swami Vivekananda and other direct disciples, they left their hearth and home and took Sannyas or monkhood. [We shall refer to Swami Vivekananda as "Swamiji" as he is reverently called in RK Mission.]

(R K Math and mission are the two wings of the same organ; this distinction will be not used in this article.)

Here is a partial list of second generation swamis that I can recall:

Swami Nikhilananda, Sw. Yatiswarananda, Sw Vireswarananda, Sw. Swarupananda, Sw Madhavananda, Sw Gambhirananda, Sw Paramananda, Sw Ashokananda, Sw Prabhavananda, Sw Siddheswarananda, Sw Satprakashananda, Sw Aseshananda, Sw Swahananda, Sw Tapasyananda, Sw Ranganathananda , sw Adishwarananda.....

I have been fortunate enough to meet with or listen to a few of them: Swami Nikhilananda in New York, Swami Ranganathananda and Swami Tapasyananda in Chennai [Madras]. I have met a few more in other places, but cannot recall the names now. I have acquaintance with these second generation swamis only through their books, articles and biographies. [I have been a regular reader of "Vedanta Kesari" from R K Math, Chennai from 1972.]

All these swamis were men of erudition and scholarship; they were great lecturers and also guides for sincere seekers in various part of the world. Above all they were men of piety, with intense devotion to the trinity: Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, the Holy Mother and Swamiji.

This article , however, is concerned more with their work towards expanding the activities of the mission, in India and

abroad, spreading the sacred lore of Vedanta---as a path towards Divine Bliss or Self-knowledge.

Through mainly the Vedanta classes and with their books, they have rendered solid service to humanity at large and to Hinduism in particular. Vedanta, of course, transcends any religion. Vedanta and the advaita philosophy are applicable for any one to follow, whether born as Hindu or not. This Universal message had been conveyed by these swamis in all countries.

Since the founding of R K Mission, social service has been an important plank of this monastic order. The monks were always there during natural calamities in India. They have served all ---without distinction of caste, sect or religion in India. They have played a definitive role in the uplift of untouchables or dalits .

Their role in spreading education [from elementary school to university level] had brought about a big change in the educational structure of the country. [I studied in " Vivekananda College" in Chennai, now upgraded to " Vivekananda University".]

Another area of great work of RK mission is the running of

several dispensaries and hospitals, not only in big cities but also in remote tribal villages.

Publication of books ,in English and in local languages, has been an important contribution of this mission. Some mission centers have their own printing presses. Advaita Ashrama, aretreast center in Mayavati, near Almora in the Himalayas was started by Swamiji. It is also a publication house with a large number of titles. RK Mission books are moderately priced and well bound serving literally millions of readers in India and abroad. The profit from the sale of books is a considerable source of funds for the mission.

Books like the classic "Gospel of Ramakrishna" , originally written by the householder-devotee " M" , Mahendra Nath Gupta, who was a school principal, later translated into English by the second-generation swami, Swami Nikhilananda [New York Vedanta center] had found its place in millions of homes. "Ramakrishna-the great master " by Swami Saradananda is another book of great value widely read by millions in India. The two-volume biography of Swamiji is another book of long-term value.

The publishing history also includes bringing out several books

of general interest on Bhakti and meditation, besides the scriptures and Vedanta texts. In recent years, several books written by second generation swamis have been printed in India at low cost; they were published in the USA at high cost. One notable book of this category is the excellent introduction: "Spiritual heritage of India" by Swami Prabhavananda [of Southern California vedanta Center, at Los Angeles] which had become a standard text. I could cite many other books of similar nature in RK Mission publications.

Swamis in the West

Swamiji introduced Vedanta to the west by his historic speeches at Chicago [1893] followed by numerous lectures and classes in USA and in England. Swamiji also brought his brother monks to the west to establish Vedanta Centres---especially Sw. Turiyananda, Sw Saradananda, Sw Abhedananda and Sw Tirgunatitananda. These swamis did the ground work for the establishment of several vedanta centres --in New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, being the main places.

There was a period when doubts were raised whether the Vedanta movement would catch on and these centers would function at all. One swami was attacked when a madcap threw a

bomb ; the swami had severe injuries and succumbed to injuries after a short time. Money was also in short supply in many centres. The land gifted by well-meaning devotees were to be developed because they were desert sites infested with reptiles and insects.

It should be noted that Hinduism is not a proselytising religion. Vedanta was taught only for those who wanted to learn and practice. Here again practice meant lot of variations to suit the western habits and mental make-up. Many would retain their Christian moorings when they learned Vedanta. Considering all these , to provide a strong foundation for Vedanta in the West is a slow and difficult process. Looking back over the past one-hundred years, we can safely say that the second generation swamis were responsible for such strong foundation for vedanta work that we find today. This ,in fact, is the main theme for my article here.

Hindu religion is complex to understand. It could be confusing and mystifying even for born Hindus in India. How difficult it would be for a westerner with a smattering of knowledge of Hinduism? Furthermore, to follow and practice the ritual part ,with liturgy, however minimal it was in these centers, is a formidable task. It is the patient and detailed

work of these swamis that enabled thousands to learn Vedanta at these centers.

The swamis were not interested in crowds of people, however enthusiastic they may be to learn vedanta. They sought to instill certain spiritual values in the devotees and promote a culture of authentic spirituality in the light of Vedanta. This indeed has been a formidable task.

Fortunately, several well-educated men and women would provide assistance and help to the swamis. For instance scholars and writers like Joseph Campbell, Frederick Manchester, Christopher Isherwood and Aldous huxley were in close contact with some of the swamis. They did considerable editing work and also wrote on their own about Ramakrishna movement. Several women writers assisted the swamis in bringing out excellent books or wrote on the advice or guidance of the swamis. Marie Louise Burke , Sister Gargi as she was known in RKM, wrote definitive works on Swami Vivekananda after much pains-taking research. She was inspired and trained by Swami Ashokananda at San Francisco center.

I mention these difficult work in Vedanta propagation in the USA by the swamis of Ramakrishna Order because we have also

witnessed half-baked swamis and yogis trying to capitalise on the naive approach of many westerners, trying to build ashrams and centers with no foundation at all--- only to witness their crumbling edifices in a decade or two. They may gather lot of money and also count hundreds of ashrams and centres in a short time. But they were not authentic in their approach and had misguided thousands of sincere seekers.

Vedanta centres were founded in several places in Europe--in Gretz, France , in Geneva , in Netherlands and in UK. One gets the feeling that the Vedanta centres did not spread so much in the Europe as it did in USA. The center started by Swami Yatiswarananda in St Moritz in Switzerland functioned for five years and was later closed by him at the outbreak of World War II. He humorously quipped that he was the creator,sustainer and destroyer of the center taking the roles of Brahma, Vishnu and shiva! Around 1930, the vedanta center at Gretz in France was founded by Swami Siddheswarananda.Then a couple of centres in Geneva and netherlands in later decades were founded. Since the Europeans were already better informed of Vedanta through academic philosophers like Max Mueller,Romain Rolland and Paul Deussen in Swamiji's time, Vedanta did not have the novelty felt by Americans. Furthermore, Europe was devastated by two

wars with severe aftermath of economic chaos. meanwhile Swami Paramananda from Boston developed a retreat centre in Italy.

Besides the number of centers and the arithmetic involved, we should consider the value of spiritual counselling and directions offered by these swamis to sincere seekers. This ,indeed, is not quantifiable. Many westerners, both men and women, brought up in traditional Christian families, derived immense benefit due to instructions in Vedanta and Hindu traditions.

The Vedanta centers of Ramakrishna Mission in USA has very small number of regular members---may be a few thousands only. But the members are greatly committed to vedantic work. Therefore the work would go on. Recently some writers have expressed some reservations about the stability and growth of this mission in 21st century. Such doubts are unfounded---in my opinion.

Some Comments and Criticisms

In the light of organisational work of these second generation swamis, we may briefly address some of the valid comments and criticisms leveled against the mission. I am not discussing their spritual ministries or religious fervor, but only the way

administration had been developed for several decades.

1 Though RK Mission is more than 100 years old, and in spite of Swamiji exhorting to create a math [monastery] and a mission for women in the name of the Holy Mother Sarada Devi on the eastern bank of the Ganga , the Saradha Math, a monastic organisation exclusively for women, was established only in 1954, the birth centenary year of the Holy Mother. In 1959, it officially separated from RK Mission and has its own president. This long delay in establishing a nunnery and convent for women has had a slowing effect on this mission. It may be noted that Swami Paramananda did create two convents in Boston and in California under mild criticism from the elders of the Belur Math. Likewise Swami Ashokananda also founded two convents in California in the sixties.

Even today the functioning of Sri Saradha Math [SSM] is in the shadows of the big banyan tree of RKM. Many Indians are not even aware of the independent existence of this organisation. This math is rendering great service ,particularly in smaller towns and rural areas. In the coming decades, we may see greater growth of this ' womwne only' math.

2 Since the inception of various Vedanta Societies in the west,

they have been run by an Indian swami sent from Belur Math ,the head quarters of RKM in Kolkatha,India. Not a single center had any minister-in-charge who was a westerner, ordained or trained by swamis here or in India. Why this?

A tight control of the organisations [The vedanta societies] from Kolkatha ensured certain continuity and enabled keeping up the traditions of Hindus from India.The chief advantage would be that the "purity of teachings" in the light of Vedanta and Sri Ramakrishna could be preserved easily with Indian swamis.

Even though many westerners were totally dedicated to the mission and had extensive training with Indian swamis and were also ordained by the Belur math into sannyas, yet they would not appointed as a minister under any circumstances. So RK Mission has remained essentially a Hindu organization controlled from Kolkatha, though preaching the Universal values of Vedanta. This situation has come under severe criticism from many followers of Sri Ramakrishna traditions. [One may contrast this with the custom followed in Self Realization Fellowship [SRF] founded by Paramahansa Yogananda in the west. All the churches and centers are run by western disciples.]

The tacit assumption appears to be that western swamis,

though ordained by the main math, may not be able to impart the high level of spritual training as given by Indian swamis. Further , there is a lurking fear that the western swamis may dilute the rigor of training given in the ashramas, as time advances. Therefore the western swamis were always given minor roles, though important, in the vedanta Societies.

{In every society there is a 'Board of Trustees' of local residents which assists and helps the resident Minister who is an Indian swami. This board has a gentle , moderating influence on the minister who can be quite independent as well.]

It should be noted that the head quarters had given considerable freedom and discretion for the resident ministers in the west, mainly with a view to modify the procedures to suit western conditions. For instance many of the services use candles instead of oil lamps, organ music and other styles adopted from protestant churches to attract the local devotees.

It is believed that there is a shortage of swamis in the RK Mission and there is always a need to open new centers and expand the activities. In this circumstance, it may happen that a hierarchy may emerge: the Indian swamis overseeing as the head of several centers while western swamis could be ministers

in separate centers or churches, much like archbishop and bishops in the Christian church hierarchy. This change could enable a rapid expansion of vedanta societies in the west. Only time will tell.

3 Over the years, inevitably, the swamis in the west would deviate in several ways from their indian counterparts---that is swamis in India. For instance, almost all swamis in the west do not shave their heads anymore. They wear western formal dress during services and public functions. These are cultural factors which may have positive as well as negative influences on the western audience.

The swamis and the novices may not follow strict vegetarian diet and may consume eggs, fish and fowl, if not red meat of beef or pork. [In one ashrama, one western swami admitted to taking chicken without the knowledge of the resident monk.] Such deviations may appear as minor transgressions in the west, but would be repugnant to Hindus in India. [I still recall an incident in the 1960's. Eyebrows were raised when a R K Mission swami took ice cream in Chennai along with others in a hot afternoon function; because many orthodox Hindus would not eat ice-cream assuming that it would contain animal gelatin.]

These deviations or cultural changes may lead to less support from certain sections of people ,both in the west and in India. For instance, when Buddhist monks always go with shaven head, why not the Hindu monks,as they do in India.? Many traditional Hindu monks/swamis appear in traditional dresses in the west. Well --for a pure vedantin, the dress code is immaterial--he may go even in a cod-piece like Bhagavan Ramana or Swami Nithyananda of Ganeshpuri. Yet, the cultural context becomes important for those in any organisation. Thus, these deviations though minor, can impact the audience much. A more austere, traditional stance of the RK mission swamis in the west may be appreciated much.

4 The RK Mission is in the forefront of social service and disaster relief work in India. Yet, the vedanta Societies do not render any social service in the west. It seems to be the avowed "official policy" of these societies ---they would only provide spiritual ministry and not social service. When the natural disaster 'Katrina' affected the New Orleans coast, many Indian organizations came forward to provide some social work,but not the Vedanta societies.One would only expect that such a policy may be changed in the coming decades.

5 The next issue to be addressed is this: " Does R K Mission,

devoted at it does to Vedanta philosophy and Advaita', ignore the importance of other aspects of Hindu spirituality such as pure devotion and raja yoga? Swamiji laid emphasis on all the four yogas--Jnana, Bhakti, Raja and Karma. The emphasis could vary. While in USA, Swamiji emphasized Jnana and Vedanta because they are free from sectarian bias. Further that could find favor in the rationalistic west. But the traditional Hindus still would vote for Bhakti yoga---not so much for Jnana. There is always the view that Jnana path is difficult and only Bhakti or devotion would suit a large number of people in any society.

R K Mission is not averse to Bhakti yoga...after all Sri Ramakrishna was a Bhaktha first, worshipping Kali, the Divine Mother with idols. Some swamis like Swami Tapasyananda, wrote extensively on Bhakti yoga. The worship of Sri Ramakrishna and the Holy Mother in all the temples of R K Mission is a daily feature. Yet, the impression created in many Vedanta centres is that Bhakti may be an inferior method and to woo westerners, one should propagate only Jnana---in terms of Advaita {Advaita itself includes a form of Bhakti!] or play down the conventional Bhakti cult of the Hindus. This , perhaps, is one of the reasons for very limited growth of vedanta societies in the west. After all, the Christians favor Bhakti in the form of

prayers and liturgy. This matter can be discussed at different levels.

Concluding remarks

This article was aimed at an in-depth look at Sri Ramakrishna Mission-- the most visible and long-standing Hindu monastic organization started by the illustrious Swami Vivekananda which had grown to considerable size and which operates in several countries. It is also the premier organization rendering social service in India which has had a great impact for the last 80 years. The influence of this mission on the educational scene in India is enormous.

In this mighty work, the second generation swamis have rendered great service both in India and in the west. This article is a form of tribute to their tireless efforts and leadership.

While highlighting their contributions , I have tended to focus on the spread of Vedanta in the west--a topic of great importance if RK Mission should grow in the near future. While the stability of the mission is not in question [though some may doubt this too] the growth of this organization is to be examined and addressed openly by all those interested in Hindu religion, its traditions and culture.

[Some may contend that if the mission becomes smaller than a critical size, it may fade into minor role.]

There is considerable difference in the way the mission operates in India and in the west. This has been brought out in some detail. Certain policy changes, as indicated earlier, may and would become necessary as the 21st century rolls on.

-----Om Tat Sat-----